Chapter 2
The Secret History of the 'Earling Exorcism'

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Abstract The exorcism of a woman variously called Anna Ecklund, Emma Schmidt, or simply 'Mary,' by Theophilus Reisinger, a German-born Capuchin monk, in Earling, Iowa, in 1928, is a near legendary event. The case was studied by William Peter Blatty in his research for his novel *The Exorcist* and many of the famous tropes popularized in the film adaptation of Blatty's novel (levitation, uncanny projectile vomiting, and a young woman physically restrained on a bed) have their genesis in accounts of this event. Most of what is known about the Earling exorcism comes from a pamphlet called *Begone, Satan! A Soul-stirring Account of Diabolical Possession in Iowa*, written in German by one Father Carl Vogl and translated by Father Celestine Kapsner, a Benedictine monk from St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. There was, however, a second account of the exorcism that was never promulgated by the Church. A pamphlet entitled *The Earling Possession Case: An Exposition of the Exorcism of 'Mary' a Demoniac and Certain Marvelous Revelations Foretelling the Near Advent of Antichrist and the Coming Persecution of the Church in the Years 1952–1955* was written in 1934 by one Rev. F. J. Bunse, S. J. The pamphlet is based on Riesinger's own account of the event written in German. Bunse's account reveals, among other things, that the exorcism of 'Mary' – as Bunse calls the energumen – *did not end in 1928!* Mary's possession resumed in 1929 and Riesinger was apparently still performing regular exorcisms on her when the pamphlet was written in 1934. Furthermore, Mary was not merely being possessed by demons – she was receiving frequent messages from 'heavenly visitors' that included Mary, Jesus, the archangel Michael, and numerous other angels and saints. This chapter examines these two accounts of the Earling exorcism in an attempt to arrive at a clearer picture both of what happened and of how the narrative was spun by Church authorities. These two accounts demonstrate the political interests at stake in the rush to narrativize the significance of Mary's experiences.

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2.1 Introduction

In July 1935, a pamphlet appeared, in English, entitled *Begone Satan! A Soul-stirring Account of Diabolical Possession.* Printed with the approval of a Catholic censor and with the imprimatur of Joseph F. Busch, bishop of St. Cloud, it described the successful exorcism of a woman by a Capuchin monk named Theophilus Riesinger at a convent in Earling, Iowa. In its first year, tens of thousands of copies of *Begone Satan!* were distributed to Catholics throughout America (Bandini 1950, p. 1). An article that appeared in *The Minneapolis Star* on 7 February 1974 described a fourth printing of 45,000 copies.[1] In 1936, *Time* adapted the pamphlet into an article and the exorcism became a legend. Historian Paula M. Kane (2015, p. 261) wrote, "The Earling exorcism became the best-known supernatural event of the decade and one of the last episodes of demonic possession in modern Catholic history." Robert Orsi (2016, p. 159) still encountered stories about the Earling exorcism while interviewing Catholic nuns in Nebraska. *Begone Satan!* was also one of the texts studied by William Peter Blatty while researching his novel *The Exorcist.* Blatty (2015, p. 22) said of this story, "I instinctively felt it could not have been invented," but also that "[t]he tone of the pamphlet seemed so overly credulous, so replete with pietistic asides and exclamations, that it turned me off."

However, for all its notoriety, very little is known about this event, including the identity of the energumen, who is referred to variously as 'Emma Schmidt,' 'Anna Ecklund,' 'Mary X,' or simply 'The Woman.' (I will refer to her as Emma Schmidt, as this name appears slightly more often in the literature.) Furthermore, few people are aware that there is a second account of the Earling exorcism, written in 1934 by Riesinger's associate, a Jesuit named Frederick J. Bunse. This account, which did not receive Church approval to be published, reveals that the exorcism *never actually ended.* Schmidt became possessed again almost immediately and was still being exorcized when the second account was written. Furthermore, Schmidt was being visited by Jesus, Mary, the archangel Michael, and other heavenly personages as well as by demons. Riesinger used her ecstasies to question these beings about various doctrinal matters, eventually constructing a complex eschatological plot in which Jesus would return in 1955 and in which the events in Earling would play a pivotal role in the final war between heaven and hell.

Between these two texts, along with other scant archival resources, there are tantalizing but ultimately inconclusive clues about who Emma Schmidt was and what her relationship with Riesinger was like. We will probably never know what

[1]The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin has a copy of *Begone Satan!* given by H. L. Mencken to Joseph Hergesheimer. It is inscribed, "For the infidel Hergesheimer in hopes of his salvation."

'really happened' to Schmidt. David Yamane (2000, p. 184) writes of religious experiences: "By the time the individual comes to understand the experience, it has past. What remains is the memory, the interpretation, the linguistification, the recounting, the emplotment, the narrativization. This is the 'data' which sociologists must study." What does seem apparent though, is an alignment of interests in which multiple parties came to benefit from the narrative that ultimately formed around Schmidt. Riesinger, who was often chastised by other clergy for his enthusiasm to exorcize, seems to have been using Schmidt as a source of revelatory authority. Through her, he constructed a connection to the realm of Catholic myth and a heroic role from himself. As for Schmidt, it is hinted that she was a survivor of incest, experienced unwanted sexual fantasies, regretted certain things done in her youth, and was thought by some to be mentally ill. The narrative of demonic possession excused her past actions and unwanted thoughts and, more importantly, rendered them understandable. There is also evidence that she came to experience agency over her exorcisms, especially as she transitioned from being the victim of demonic attack to a seer playing a key role in the coming apocalypse. Finally, *Begone Satan!* appealed to American Catholics who had just experienced the stinging defeat of Al Smith's presidential campaign in 1928. It served as a reminder that supernatural forces were real and that Catholic prayers were still efficacious. In the end, the story of what happened to Schmidt was produced through collaboration by different interests. I suggest that such alignments of interests are, in fact, common to the way supernatural narratives are elicited, interpreted, and deployed. We will never know what the originary event behind the narrative was, but it may be possible to untangle the various interpreters who produced the narrative in order to arrive at a greater understanding of their worldviews, hopes, and fears.

2.2 Begone Satan!

Neither Riesinger nor Schmidt lived in Iowa. Riesinger was friends with Joseph Steiger, the monsignor of St. Joseph's parish, and Steiger had agreed to host the exorcism at the Convent of the Franciscan Sisters. Following the events of 1928, Steiger visited Germany in 1931, where he told his story to a priest named Carl Vogl (sometimes written as Vogel), a canon in the diocese of Passau. Vogel wrote a long article for the German-language Catholic magazine *Liebfrauenbote*, entitled 'Vade Satana – Weiche, Satan! Eine Aufsehenerregende Teufelsaustreibung in Nordamerica' [Begone Satan! A Fascinating Devil Expulsion in North America]. The magazine had some circulation in America among German Catholics (Bandini 1950, pp. 2–7). Indeed, nearly everyone involved in the Earling exorcism was either German or German-American. A Benedictine monk named Celestine Kapsner at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, translated Vogl's article as a pamphlet. After receiving approval from the bishop, it was published in July 1935 as *Begone Satan!*

In Steiger's story (as recounted through Vogl), Riesinger contacted him about a woman in need of exorcism. Riesinger had received approval for this exorcism from Thomas William Drumm, bishop of Des Moines, a detail that is supported by an article that appeared on 23 September 1928, in *The Des Moines Register*. Steiger is also described as speaking about the exorcism personally with his bishop (Vogl 2016, p. 58). Both Schmidt and Riesinger are described as arriving separately in Earling by train for the exorcism. Where they were arriving from is not stated. Schmidt is described as being 40 years old, but little else is said about her.

At the convent, Schmidt displayed numerous symptoms of possession, including the ability to speak English, Latin, and German, and an aversion to everything holy. She could tell whether or not food had been blessed. At one point she is described as preternaturally leaping from the bed and clinging to the wall above the door frame. Much description is given to her vomiting, which she did 10–20 times a day, despite eating almost nothing. The author writes, "These came in quantities that were humanly speaking impossible to lodge in a normal being" (Vogl 2016, p. 65). This detail was almost certainly an influence on Blatty's *The Exorcist*.

Various possessing entities identified themselves in the course of the exorcism, including Lucifer and Beelzebub (apparently, two separate entities), and Judas. One of the entities identified itself as Schmidt's deceased father Jacob (or Jake in Bunse's account), who had somehow escaped from hell. Vogl (2016, p. 69) writes:

> He now admitted that he had repeatedly tried to force his own daughter to commit incest with him. But she had firmly resisted him. Therefore he had cursed her and wished inhumanly that the devils would enter into her and entice her to commit every possible sin against chastity, thereby ruining her, body and soul… Even in hell he was still scheming how to torture and molest his child.

The implication in this account is that Jacob's 'curse' was the cause of Schmidt's possession. Jacob is also described as having been a scoffer of the Church while alive. Finally there was a female entity named Mina, described as having been Jacob's mistress in life. Mina had also escaped from hell, where she was sent for her immoral relationship with Jacob and also for murdering her own children. When asked how many children she murdered, Mina answered, "Three – No, actually four!" (Vogl 2016, p. 70). Mina especially enjoyed spitting on Steiger and Riesinger. The other demons possessing Schmidt are not named, but there was apparently not a finite number of them. Vogl (2016, p. 81) writes, "The number of silent devils was countless."

The exorcism lasted for 23 days, during which Schmidt did not eat and "nourishment in liquid form was injected into her" (Vogl 2016, p. 84). At one point Steiger states that he is "unhappy about the whole affair" (Vogl 2016, p. 74). In the end, the exorcism is presented as both successful and final: "From that time on, the woman, always sincerely good, pious and religious, visited the Blessed Sacrament and assisted at the Holy Mass" (Vogl 2016, p. 91). The text does discuss how the demons – forced by the exorcism to reveal their plans – explained that the Antichrist would reign between 1952 and 1955 (Vogl 2016, p. 87). However, the emphasis of the narrative is on the exorcism as a collective victory for the entire Church. Steiger

is described as asking the parish for prayers and penance to aid the exorcism. Vogl (2016, p. 89) writes: "The faithful flocked to the church in large numbers from early morn until late in the evening in order that, by their prayers, they might add their mite to the word of the Church in this her mission."

Begone Satan! was not without its critics. Albert Bandini, an Italian-born priest from California, wrote his own pamphlet in 1936 critiquing it. Bandini objected that the story contradicted Catholic theology. He argued that the sovereignty of God would not allow a damned soul to return in order to commit "a sort of monstrous soul-incest" (Bandini 1950, p. iii). He also cited scriptural authorities explaining that Beelzebub and Lucifer are different names for the same entity. Bandini was unimpressed that Schmidt, who was almost certainly a German Catholic, understood English, German, and Latin. He also hints at an ulterior motive held by Schmidt and Riesinger, opining, "On the whole this tremendous concentration of all the forces of Hell under their supreme commander about a poor ignorant woman at Earling, Iowa, appears considerably unnecessary" (Bandini 1950, p. 10).

Bandini (1950, p. 5) researched how the narrative in *Begone Satan!* came to be, writing, "It seems that we have in the pamphlet a more or less coherent reconstruction designed to make an intelligible dialogue out of a loose mass of words, howls, and yells: a reconstruction contrived 3 years after the events in Iowa by a man in Germany and based on some personal reminiscences of the Pastor and a good deal of hearsay." When Bandini wrote to people involved in creating *Begone Satan!*, they seemed to back-pedal. Steiger replied to Bandini, "Had I known that Father Vogl would publish the story I would have refused to give him a detailed account of it… While the pamphlet is not chronological, it is nevertheless all correct: the facts given are true and I can vouch for them and I do not fear the searchlight if turned on the case" (quoted in Bandini 1950, p. 3). Bandini also wrote to Monsignor J. P. Durham V. G. of the diocese of Fort Wayne. Durham was the censor who gave the pamphlet a declaration of *nihil obstat* [nothing stands in the way], meaning that nothing in it contradicted Catholic doctrine. This point was emphasized in the *Time* magazine article about the pamphlet. Durham replied, "Concerning my *nihil obstat* on the pamphlet *Begone Satan,* let me state that I knew nothing about the pamphlet until letters came to me from different parts of the country seeking information and then, only after some months I received a copy from a Catholic book store and read a few pages and threw the pamphlet in the waste basket" (quoted in Bandini 1950, p. i). Durham's explanation – that he gave a *nihil obstat* to a text he had never even seen – seems unlikely but demonstrates his embarrassment when confronted by a skeptic like Bandini.

2.3 The Bunse Text

The second account of the Earling text appears in a manuscript entitled *The Earling Possession Case: An Exposition of The Exorcism of 'Mary' A Demoniac and Certain Marvelous Revelations Foretelling the Near Advent of Antichrist and the Coming*

Persecution of the Church in the Years 1952–1955, by F. J. Bunse. Bunse was born in 1863 in Elberfeld, Germany, and came to New York, possibly following the expulsion of Jesuits in the 1870s and 80s. In 1924, he was stationed at St. Ann's Church in Buffalo, New York. There, according to the text, Riesinger lived with him for over 3 weeks and told him about the 1928 exorcism. This document, which I will refer to as 'The Bunse Text,' was never published, but multiple versions exist that were apparently typed by hand. The first lines read:

> N.B. The following facts concerning the famous 'Earling Case' are culled from the German manuscript of the case written by Rev. Father Theophilus, O. M. Cap.
>
> THESE ARE NOT TO BE PUBLISHED THROUGH THE PRESS OR FROM THE PULPIT
>
> At the command of our Lord the case has been sent to the Holy Office. The translation and discussion of the facts are hereby submitted by Rev. F. J. Bunse, S. J., Buffalo, New York, February-March, 1934. Rev F. J. Bunse, S. J. died last year. (Bunse 1934, p. 1)

It is not stated who wrote this *nota bene*. According to an obituary in *The New York Times*, Rev. Frederick J. Bunse died on 17 April 1935. It is possible that this text existed as a hand-written document until an unknown typist transcribed it in 1936. At any rate, where *Begone Satan!* draws on a story recounted by Steiger, The Bunse Text draws on Riesinger's account. It has more details about Schmidt, since Riesinger knew this woman long before 1928.

I have tracked down two different versions of this text. The first was obtained from the University of Scranton. Corrections have been made to this text in pencil and the name 'Theophilus Riesinger' is written neatly on the cover in pencil. It is likely because of William Peter Blatty that the university acquired the text. It was donated by Richard McSorley, a Jesuit who had taught at Georgetown. Blatty was a student at Georgetown and received his demonological training from Jesuits there. Jason Miller, who played Father Karras in *The Exorcist*, was a graduate of the University of Scranton and may have convinced McSorley to donate his rare demonological text to their library. Sadly, this text was missing pages 14 and 35! I located a different copy from The University of Saint Mary of the Lake that appears to contain the missing content. Each copy was individually typed with different pagination. My citations refer to the copy from the University of Saint Mary of the Lake as it is the more complete.

Bunse refers to the energumen as 'Mary X.' The text gives more hints about who she was and her relationship to Riesinger. We learn that she was born in 1882, which would have made her nearer to 50 years of age in 1928. We also learn that Riesinger had previously exorcized her on 12 June 1908. Finally, we learn that her possession was still ongoing in 1934. Bunse (1934, p. 29) writes, "Mary was free, but only a very short time, perhaps a day or two… The second and most trying period of the Earling exorcisms was soon to begin for the honor of God, the welfare of the Church, and the salvation of Souls. We do not intend to speak about that period." However, the text *does* discuss other exorcisms of Schmidt, at least obliquely.

There is a reference to Riesinger exorcizing Schmidt in Milwaukee (Bunse 1934, p. 30). This exorcism was apparently public as it caused "many conversions" and

was attended by a physician. It is unclear whether this was before or after the exorcism in Earling. An interview with Riesinger that appeared on 8 March 1936, in *The Des Moines Register*, describes Riesinger exorcizing Schmidt "in 1926 and again in 1928." It is possible that Riesinger and Schmidt travelled the Midwest for a time, providing multiple exhibitions of exorcism.

Bunse (1934, pp. 2–3) concedes that Schmidt already knew English and German, but adds that while possessed she understood "Latin and Hebrew, the Italian, Polish and other Slavonic languages which she had not learned." The damned spirits also appear in this text, although Schmidt's father is named "Jake" and Minnie is described as Schmidt's aunt rather than Jake's mistress. There are transcripts of Riesinger interrogating the spirits, that Riesinger likely reconstructed from memory. Riesinger apparently knew Schmidt's family, as he tells Jake, "You wretched dog, you want to ruin your child forever? I have known you in life, miserable hypocrite" (Bunse 1934, p. 4). Minnie explains she is in hell for "devilish deeds," for being baptized Lutheran, and also for murdering her children. When asked how many she murdered, she answers, "Five, and another one, six in all" (Bunse 1934, p. 3). This detail suggests an actual conversation that Steiger and Riesinger remembered slightly differently. The text also says that Minnie was "known among the people as a witch" (Bunse 1934, p. 2) and the transcript suggests that "bewitched herbs" are the cause of Schmidt's possession:

> Q. Did you give something to the girl by means of which the relation of this girl to the devils was established?
> R. I have done that.
> Q. How did you do that; by food or drink?
> R. Both ways. (Bunse 1934, p. 3)

These seem to be leading questions, but Bunse cites the rite of exorcism from the *Rituale Romanum*, which does indeed instruct the exorcist to ask the demon if it is there because the possessed has consumed magical objects, and, if so, to vomit them up. However, Bunse (1934, p. 4) further adds, "A curse actually uttered against Mary by another woman, whose name we are bound to conceal at this time, though it really was not meant, enabled the spirits to enter Mary again… Another curse hurled against Mary by her own father Jake (we have heard it in the questioning) gave the spirits a new Satanic title to her body." The impression is that Schmidt was becoming possessed again and again, always through no fault of her own, and that new explanations were devised on each occasion.

Where *Begone Satan!* emphasizes the triumph of the Catholic community over Satan, the focus of The Bunse Text is apocalyptic prophecy. Bunse (1934, p. 5) explains that on "a certain day" during Schmidt's possession, new spirits arrived that are described as "good spirits, heavenly visitors." This day, which Bunse states occurred sometime in 1930, marked Schmidt's transition from energumen to prophet. Or rather, Schmidt and Riesinger became a sort of prophetic team. In 1931, God told Schmidt, "All the revelations which I have made to you are to be given to my servant, your confessor, that he may prepare the world – not only that he himself may know them but that he may prepare the world" (Bunse 1934, p. 6). In addition

to the prophecy that the Antichrist would reign between 1952 and 1955, the heavenly visitors told Schmidt that Prince Otto of Hapsburg would prove to be "The Great Monarch" that would precede the return of Christ. End-time prophecies of a Great Monarch are a feature of European Catholic folk tradition and several other European Catholic mystics have discussed this figure.[2] The scenario ends with everyone on Earth seeing Christ in the sky in 1955 and joining the Catholic Church.

Riesinger continued to extract these prophecies during the exorcisms, asking the heavenly visitors questions whenever Schmidt said they were present. In one case, Riesinger even asked whether the Capuchins could finance a new building. Curiously, the heavenly visitors always spoke in German, while the demons spoke English (Bunse 1934, pp. 8–9). The text describes Riesinger posing questions to the heavenly visitors via letters in 1933 (Bunse 1934, p. 18). Apparently Riesinger and Schmidt parted ways at some point but continued to produce prophecy by correspondence.

Schmidt and Riesinger saw themselves not only as revealing the future, but as playing a pivotal role in defeating the forces of evil. In 1930, Jesus spoke to Mary, declaring, "I rejoice, My daughter, that you persevere so bravely and are the instrument by means of which great honor is done to Me and great help given to the Catholic Church. In this exorcism ten million devils have already been cast into hell." Jesus is followed by the archangel Michael, who describes "billions and billions of devils cast into the abyss in Earling" (Bunse 1934, p. 23). Schmidt was also told that revolution did not break out in Germany, that the Church was not persecuted in Italy and Spain, and that a 1931 bombing plot against the pope failed, all because her exorcisms had depleted Satan of the demonic agents necessary to complete these plans. During one exorcism we are told, "Lucifer shouted in despair: 'Oh, that these exorcisms would take an end'" (Bunse 1934, p. 25).

Riesinger wrote an 'official report' that was sent through his provincial to the General of the Capuchins in Rome, with instructions to forward it to the Holy Office. To confirm whether the Holy Office had received his report, on 9 August 1932 he simply asked Schmidt's heavenly messengers, and they confirmed that the Holy Office had indeed received it (Bunse 1934, p. 21). The text also relates that he described at least some of these prophecies to his provincial where they concerned local affairs. The provincial replied that her prophecies were more likely from the Devil (Bunse 1934, p. 8).

Indeed, throughout the text there are hints that other Catholic clergy found Riesinger annoying. Bunse (1934, p. 20) describes priests who "belittle Father Theophilus" and writes, "His fellow religious and other priests expressed doubts about the soundness of his judgment on account of the stand he took in Mary's [Schmidt's] case." He also writes, "It was not one of the Father's hobbies to exorcize, as some very thoughtlessly said" (Bunse 1934, p. 25). Bunse's conclusion is

[2]The idea of the Great Monarch in The Bunse Text is specifically adapted from Bartholomew Holzhauser's (1613–1658) interpretation of Revelation 10. Holzhauser was a German priest and mystic. He believed an angel described in Revelation 10 was actually prophesying a human monarch that would spread Christianity and bring peace to the whole Earth.

that criticism from other clergy paradoxically *proves* that Riesinger and Schmidt were really fighting supernatural evil; he writes (1934, p. 25):

> No doubt, the evil spirits who threatened Father Theophilus to take vengeance on him for his persistent and successful work against hell by ruining his character, especially among his own fellow religious, have succeeded to a large extent. But could anything else be expected of the powers of darkness? The efforts of hell prove the genuineness of father's case.

This rhetoric is quite common in the rhetoric of modern Catholic seers and mystics: when Church authorities doubt private revelations, a seer's followers will often claim that persecution proves the revelation is true. At one point, Schmidt described being visited by the spirit of a deceased Capuchin named Father Fulgentius. In life Fulgentius doubted Schmidt's possession but, speaking through Schmidt as a spirit, announced that she tells the truth! (Bunse 1934, p. 8).

2.4 Who Were Schmidt and Riesinger?

From these texts, and a few clues found in newspapers articles, it is possible to create a partial sketch of Schmidt and her relationship with Riesinger. Bunse (1934, p. 1) describes Schmidt as "small of stature, and of a weak rather than strong constitution." He adds that she had wanted to become a nun, but was prevented by her mother. She is described as working in "factories" alongside Protestants who mocked Catholicism. Bunse (1934, p. 1) also describes the circumstances that led to her first exorcism by Riesinger:

> When she was about 26 years old [i.e. 1908], she suddenly gave up her pious Christian life completely. She became melancholy, avoided company, and finally went to places and persons that cast a shadow on her good character.
>
> She threw blessed articles away, smashed crucifixes, and had thoughts of despair. People were amazed and scandalized. Some described this sudden change to an operation she had undergone.

The last sentence is perplexing. It seems as though the sentence ought to say either that the change was 'described *as* an operation' or that is was '*ascribed* to an operation.' The syntax appears this way in both copies of The Bunse Text. If Schmidt did undergo a literal operation that Bunse does not name, it seems likely that it was an abortion. Both accounts specify that her father repeatedly *attempted* to have an incestuous relationship with her. An article that appeared on 23 September 1928 in *The Des Moines Register* read, "One rumor, said to be based on facts, is that the woman's condition was brought on by ill treatment from her father, although the nature of the abuse or exactly what mental conditions it caused in unknown." Bunse (1934, p. 5) also briefly describes a former "lover": "Again, after a certain John, Mary's [Schmidt's] lover, whose impure intensions she baffled, had commited [sic] suicide and gone to hell, he was like Minnie and Jake, sent by Lucifer into Mary's body to ruin and drag her to hell." Although Bunse states that Schmidt was a virgin, it seems plausible (yet far from certain) that Schmidt became pregnant – either after

being raped by her father or by her lover – and sought an abortion. We might further speculate that the behavior described here would be a natural reaction to the feelings engendered by such a development. Schmidt's behavior was interpreted by some as hysteria. Bunse (1934, p. 7) writes:

> At one time – it was in New York – Mary was suspected of being insane; but before she could be sent to an insane asylum, she was examined by two physicians, independently of each other: each of the two declared that the girl was both 'bodily and mentally quite healthy,' and that there was no touch of insanity or hysteria in her.

Both texts emphasize that Schmidt was suffering from unwanted sexual fantasies that were attributed to demons, although Bunse is more graphic; he writes (1934, pp. 2–5), "The spirits tormented her every night from 12 to 3 by arousing her passions and tempting her to commit sin… For years she saw these horrid figures, male and female, doing the most revolting acts of impurity before her eyes, arousing her passions, and inciting her to sin." It is unclear how much of this is Schmidt's own description of her problem and how much is prurient interest on the part of the exorcist. The proposed diagnosis of 'hysteria' likely had to do with medical notions of the time about 'disordered sexuality' in women.[3]

However, some of the behavior attributed to demonic control would probably not have been attributed to a medical problem, but simply to deviation from Catholic norms. For example, Bunse (1934, p. 2) writes, "It was these wicked spirits who blinded her and drove her about the city so that, when she intended to go to church she at last found herself in a clairvoyant's room." Mediums and Spiritualists would have been common in 1908 and visiting one would not be unusual. But attributing this behavior to demonic possession may have allowed Schmidt to preserve a self-narrative as a virtuous Catholic woman.

A bit more may be pieced together about Schmidt, but first we must investigate her exorcist, Theophilus Riesinger, about whom much more is known. According to an obituary that appeared on 10 November 1941 in *The Appleton Post-Crescent*, Riesinger was born in Stelza, Bavaria, on 27 February 1868, to Jacob and Katherine Riesinger. He had three brothers – Joseph, James, and Alyosius – who remained in Germany. An article from 12 June 1942, in the Catholic publication *The Messenger*, states that he came to the United States in 1892 and stayed at Saint Fidelist Monastery and at Yonkers before he entered the Capuchin novitiate at Detroit. He completed studies for the priesthood at St. Francis monastery in Milwaukee, where he was ordained on 29 June 1899 by archbishop Frederick Katzer. He was initially sent back to St. Fidelist monastery. In 1904 he was briefly transferred to Saint Michael's parish in Brooklyn and then to Our Lady of Sorrows. This church, sometimes called

[3]The 'operation' alluded to could also have been a clitoridectomy. Schmidt was in the right place, historically and geographically speaking, and suffered the appropriate symptoms to receive such a procedure. The bulk of medical articles describing this procedure were published between 1880 and 1924. Sarah Rodriguez (2014, p. 13) describes a 29-year-old woman named 'Lizzie B' who was subjected to a clitoridectomy by her father in Brooklyn in 1896 because she was 'morose' and masturbated frequently. Schmidt was of a similar age in 1908 and is described as having a similar combination of depression and vivid sexual fantasies.

'Pitt Street' in church writings, was established by the Capuchins. It was known as *Kleindeutschland* [little Germany] and served as the national parish for German immigrants. However, by 1904, the parish was already becoming predominately Italian. Riesinger was sent there because he knew Italian. Around this time he also took a course on socialism at Fordham University, allegedly in order to combat the influence of socialism on working class Catholics.

Notably, *The Messenger* states that in 1912 his interest in exorcism brought him into conflict with diocesan authorities and he was transferred to Appleton, Wisconsin. (Appleton is in the diocese of Green Bay, where Frederick Katzer was bishop before transferring to Milwaukee.) Riesinger was transferred to Marathon, Wisconsin, where he helped lay the the groundwork for St. Anthony Seminary, and then back to Appleton in 1921. He died in Menasha, Wisconsin, collapsing shortly after Mass. (According to an article by Maija Penikis, that appeared on 4 March 1973 in *The Post-Crescent*, he actually died *in the middle* of communion.)

It seems that Riesinger deliberately tried to cultivate an image for himself as an exorcist. The obituary in *The Messenger* notes that his patron saint was Michael, and characterizes him as a "warrior knight." He also kept a running tally of his successful exorcisms. The article in *Time* about *Begone Satan!*, from 17 February 1936, states that he had performed 19 exorcisms prior to the one in Earling. That same year, Riesinger gave an interview to journalist Frances Stover that appeared on 8 March in *The Des Moines Register*. There Riesinger stated he had exorcized "22 possessed persons." If Schmidt is one such person, who are the other 21? In the interview, Riesinger said that "hundreds" of allegedly possessed people were sent to him by both "priests and laymen," but added that usually his investigation did not conclude that the possession was genuine. In fact, Riesinger seems to have been a wandering exorcist. In 1973, Penikis tracked down the son of a physician who had observed one of Riesinger's exorcisms in Milwaukee. The physician asked to observe an exorcism Riesinger was to perform in Texas, but Riesinger forbade this. He may have used mission work as an opportunity to perform exorcisms or he may have done numerous trips like the 1928 one to Earling and this is simply the only one that was documented.

It seems unlikely he had approval from a bishop for all of these exorcisms. Riesinger's activities were clearly an embarrassment to some Church authorities, including the diocese of New York. Penikis interviewed a Capuchin priest, who remarked, "Twenty times in any man's life-time is a great deal. The Church obviously felt it was far too often. Theophilus apparently diagnosed possession too often."

From these clues, it is clear that Riesinger met Schmidt in New York. Bunse (1934, p. 8) states that Riesinger met Schmidt when she was 16, which would have been around 1898. Riesinger was ordained in 1899 and sent to Saint Fidelis monastery in New York City. Schmidt may well have been one of the first people he met. An article that appeared on 23 September 1928 in *The Des Moines Register* read, "Relatives living near here are thought to have prevailed upon the Reverend Joseph Steiger, pastor of St. Joseph's church, to bring the woman to Earling from an eastern city for the ritual." As previously noted, the transcripts of exorcisms also suggest

that Riesinger knew Schmidt's father. It seems that while Schmidt may have had relatives in the Midwest, her family was from New York.

In the Stover interview, Riesinger said he performed his first exorcism at age 40. This would have been around 1908, and Bunse states that Schmidt's first possession lasted from 1908 until 18 June 1912. We can reasonably conclude that Schmidt was the first exorcism of Riesinger's career. Riesinger also told Stover:

> I watched the case for years before I acted. The woman was my penitent – you understand, she confessed to me. She had always been very good. But all at once she did not come to church any more, she refused to receive the sacraments, she could no longer see the error of her ways and she was tormented day and night by horrible phantasms. My duty was to find out whether or not there was a possession. So I exorcized and forced the devil to tell me that he was there.

From this, it seems that Riesinger, and not Schmidt, was the one who first interpreted Schmidt's behavior as possession. Riesinger also admits that instead of confirming possession and then performing an exorcism, he used the ritual exorcism to *prove* demonic possession. He adds that he made the demons confess that Schmidt had always lived a good life and had not committed a mortal sin.

The interview also contains insights into Riesinger's demonology. He stated that possessed people often contain "diabolical material" in their bodies that must be expelled, a belief that may explain the emphasis on vomiting in *Begone Satan!* He added that devils often take possession through curses and he used the word '*maleficium*' – a Latin term for sorcery found in early modern treatises on demonology. He also stated, "As a rule, priests who exorcize do not live more than a couple of years after an exorcism, but God has given me an extra gift of strength."

Bunse (1934, p. 24) writes that Schmidt was "quite free in 1912, and that for a long time." However, she and Riesinger apparently continued to correspond after he left New York. The Stover interview mentions an exorcism in 1926, suggesting they saw each other at least once between 1912 and 1928. Bunse (1934, p. 26) describes a letter Schmidt wrote to Riesinger on 16 July 1928 in which she wrote, "The devils called you a d.s. of a.b. [dumb son of a bitch]" and said, "Does he not know that hell is stronger than heaven, that there are more in hell than heaven? … The devil adds that he will make life so disagreeable for me that I will gladly turn to a life of sin." The 1928 exorcism in Earling began the following month. This letter suggests Schmidt was anxious to receive another exorcism and not above delivering taunts and threats to get Riesinger's attention.

By the time Schmidt began receiving messages from 'heavenly visitors' she was exerting increasing agency over the exorcisms. For example, Bunse (1934, pp. 6–7) writes:

> At one time she awoke from an exorcism, she said she had received orders from heavenly visitors for Father Theophilus, such as the following: St. Michael told me – she was addressing Father Theophilus – you should use Prayers of the Ritual rather than make your own. Your strength, he said, is in the prayers of the Ritual. It was the truth; Father Theophilus, quite exhausted from the long exorcism and no longer able to read from the Ritual, had formed his own prayers.

There are also hints that Schmidt embraced her new role as seer. Teresa Neumann was a famous mystic and stigmatic in Bavaria. She was very popular with German Catholics in America and likely a model for Schmidt's emerging role as a seer. Joseph Schrembs, bishop of Cleveland, was another German immigrant who travelled to Bavaria in 1927 to speak with Neumann. Schrembs wrote a pamphlet called *Amazing Teresa Neumann*, in which she was quoted as telling Schrembs, "In your country there lives a person in whom soon great things will be done." Someone apparently read this pamphlet in Schmidt's presence and Schmidt later claimed that, when they got to this quotation, she heard a voice saying, "You are that person" (Bunse 1934, p. 5).

It seems that the exorcisms were an arrangement that benefitted both Schmidt and Riesinger. Schmidt's feelings of depression and shame were transformed into a heroic role of singular importance. Riesinger seems to have enjoyed his role as 'warrior knight' and the co-revealer of an unfolding apocalyptic scenario. Bunse (1934, p. 10) writes, "The supposition that Father Theophilus himself fabricated revelations involves a sinful daring of which no one who knows Father would think him capable." This disclaimer suggests that at least some of Riesinger's contemporaries suspected he was soliciting these revelations from Schmidt for his own satisfaction.

We do not know what finally became of Schmidt, although the exorcisms were apparently still ongoing in 1936, as revealed in the Stover interview:

> 'About the Earling, Ia, case, father?'
>
> 'That is a mystery that is still going on. God has destined that case to break the power of hell in a very special way so that billions and billions of devils will be locked up and unable to do harm. This case will continue until Christ says, It is enough.'
>
> 'Do you mean, father, that she will have to be exorcized again and gain, and that each time billions and billions of devils will be locked up and made unable to work harm to humanity?'
>
> He nods his head in serious assent. 'It is no mystery to me,' he says.

Why should the exorcisms ever end if both exorcist and energumen regarded them as a source of ultimate significance? One wonders, though, whether Schmidt lived to the age of 73 – to the year of the return of Christ as predicted by her revelations.

2.5 Conclusions

As extraordinary as the Earling exorcism case was, it is a story that has played out before. Schmidt was not the first Catholic woman to shift between being a tormented energumen and an exalted martyr and seer. In early modern Europe, demonic possession and holiness were frequently intertwined. Sarah Ferber (2004, p. 125) has described how, for Catholic women in early modern France, possession was "simultaneously the means for gaining spiritual authority and a source of profound vulnerability." Schmidt's case shows that these same dynamics surrounding

exorcism, gender, and power were still in place among German Catholics living in the United States in the early twentieth century.

Riesinger's conflict with Church authorities also repeated an older pattern. *Begone Satan!* ends with a letter from a Milwaukee physician named John Dundon, who interviewed Riesinger. Dundon opines that exorcism "should command the patronage of the medical professions, rather than to be allotted to the realm of superstition of necromancy" (Vogl 2016, p. 94). But, strictly speaking, Riesinger *was* a necromancer, in the sense that his exorcisms were conjuring spirits of the dead and interrogating them about doctrinal matters. This was one of the key issues that prompted Bandini to write his own pamphlet condemning *Begone Satan!* The question of whether possessed people are inherently untrustworthy, or whether spirits can be compelled to tell the truth, has been the subject of great debate in Catholic exorcism. Rule 14 of the rite of exorcism found in *The Rituale Romanum* specifically states, "The exorcist must not digress into senseless prattle nor ask superfluous questions or such as are prompted by curiosity, particularly as they pertain to future and hidden matters, all of which have nothing to do with his office" (Kesler 2012, p. 275). These are, of course, exactly the kinds of questions that Riesinger and Bunse seemed most interested in. In Riesinger's defense, Bunse (1934, p. 3) comments, "It is true that the evil spirits are liars by habit; but they are compelled to tell the truth by the exorcism of the Church when, under the ordeal of the exorcism they attempt to lie, they feel great pain and soon cry out, 'I have told a lie'."

Moshe Sluhovsky (2008, p. 19) describes how the traditional warning for exorcists not to listen to demons began to falter following the Protestant Reformation, when some Church officials turned to exorcism as a source of supernatural authority to confirm the tenets of Catholicism. While Schmidt's exorcism took place long after the Protestant Reformation, her community had similar concerns. It is understandable that German Catholic immigrants, finding themselves in a new country where Catholics were a minority (and apparently mocked in the factories where Schmidt sought employment), might welcome exorcism as confirmation of their doctrines as well as of the supernatural authority of their Church. Tellingly, one of the questions Riesinger asks the damned spirit 'Minnie' is, "Which faith is the saving one?" to which she answers, "Only the Catholic Faith is the saving one," repeating this again and again (Bunse 1934, p. 3). Vogl's account, especially, portrays the 1928 exorcism as an affirmation not only of the supernatural authority of the Catholic Church but of the capacity of the entire Catholic polity to defeat the forces of Satan.

Finally, discourse about the Earling exorcism points to ongoing tensions in American Catholicism between the 'vernacular religion' as experienced by lay Catholics and the 'ecclesiastical religion' espoused by Church authorities. An article that appeared on 21 March 1993, in *The Des Moines Register*, related an interview with Chuck Kottas, who was a priest at St. Joseph's church in Earling where Joseph Steiger had once worked. Asked about the exorcism, Kottas replied:

> We have people ask about that from time to time, but we don't answer the question. We think our community has more going for it than some incident that supposedly happened way back then. Most people today will tell you there probably wasn't any possession at all, that the poor little girl probably just had seizures. It was blown all out of proportion.

The various phenomena described in *Begone Satan!* cannot be explained away as 'seizures' and, of course, Schmidt was not a 'little girl' in 1928, but a woman in her mid-40s. Kottas may have been conflating the event somewhat with Blatty's character, Reagan MacNeil, in *The Exorcist*. But at stake in Kottas' response is a concern that such stories are an *embarrassment* and a distraction from what he considers to be the important work of the Church. We see this same concern 60 years earlier in Bandini's account (1950, p. 2), where he writes, "American Catholics have been accused of many things but of nothing so disgusting as the hill-billy theology of 'Begone Satan'." Note that Bandini, an Italian immigrant, frames this embarrassment as a problem unique to American Catholics. In the early twentieth century, American Catholics were still perceived as superstitious immigrants and Bandini clearly feared *Begone Satan!* was lending ammunition to this stereotyping; he writes (1950, p. 10), "The Author's demonology fits more with the idea of Walpurgis Night with Imps and Gnomes and Sprites and Witches on broomsticks than with Catholic doctrine." Walpurgis Night is, of course, a Germanic tradition associated with witchcraft. Bandini's comments portray an image of a Church desperately trying to rein in the superstitious folk traditions of German immigrants.

Whatever else the Earling exorcism was, perhaps it is best conceived as what Robert Orsi calls "an abundant event." Orsi employs this concept to think about such historical events as the experience of the Marian seer Bernadette Soubirous at Lourdes. The core of such an event is 'a density of relationships': in these narratives of supernatural encounters there is an intimacy not only between people, but between heaven and Earth, and the living and the dead. Within such a situation, the imagination becomes 'unlocked,' in the sense that old assumptions fall away and new ideas of what is possible emerge. Orsi (2016, p. 67) writes, "The givenness of the 'real' dissolves in the abundant event." During the exorcism, Schmidt's intimate relationship with Riesinger became inextricably linked to her relationships with the demons and 'heavenly visitors,' with her deceased family members, with mystics in Germany, and with officials in the Vatican. The exorcism even entailed a relationship between Schmidt and potential forms of *herself*, reflecting both her darkest fears and highest hopes about what kind of person she might be. Thanks to Joseph Steiger, the abundant event spread first through the Earling parish and then across the Atlantic ocean and throughout America. As the prophecies recorded in The Bunse Text reveal, imaginations were 'unlocked' and new futures became conceivable. Paula Kane (2015, p. 262) writes, "The Earling exorcism became an event that propelled Catholics from homogenous time into 'messianic time,' transforming the United States into a battleground where cosmic forces are always wrangling and shaping an environment that made Sister Thorn's stigmata less incredible."

However, Orsi also notes that the Church always tries to control the supernatural 'presence' that emerges during abundant events. Presence – the experience of closeness to the supernatural – is both powerful and potentially destabilizing. Orsi (2016, pp. 29–30) writes, "Presence forever exceeds the bounds set for it. This is the perennial dilemma of Catholic authority. The power of the Church depends on offering access to supernatural presence while at the same time controlling who gets such access and when." The story of the Earling exorcism has the power to energize

American Catholics (Celestine Kapsner, the translator, called it a 'soul-stirring' account) or to bring embarrassment to the Church as an example of superstitious folk religion and 'hill-billy theology.' The Bunse Text, which was not meant to be published, had the potential for a full-blown Messianic movement centered around the return of Christ in 1955. It is no wonder Church authorities like Bandini and Kottas worked to deflate the story. In the final analysis, perhaps the most remarkable thing about the Earling exorcism is not that it happened, but that the story was ever told at all.

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